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Interview: Is Stuart Webber the right man to turn Norwich City's fortunes around?



Stuart Webber (left) has started work at Norwich City. *Credit: Jasonpix/PA*

Following the appointment of Stuart Webber as Norwich City's new sporting director, we decided to find out more about a role that is still pretty unfamiliar to football fans in England.

We fired some questions at [Dr Dan Parnell](#) who is a senior lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University and has done extensive research into leadership and governance in sport.

- What exactly does the role of a sporting director entail?



Dr Dan Parnell has done a lot of research into the role of the sporting director. *Credit: Manchester Metropolitan University*

"There is a bit of confusion around the role of the sporting director.

In Europe, where the genesis of the role first began, the sporting director oversees the sporting departments, reporting directly to the owners.

The departments under the leadership of the sporting director includes medical and sport science support, recruitment, the academy, Under-21s, and the first team.

The broad aim of the sporting director is to develop and deliver a strategic plan towards achieving success. In many cases this might include developing the strategic plan too!

This includes; recruiting and supporting the first team head coach; recruiting the best people to lead various departments; overseeing the academy and development teams; managing the movement of players or developing a high-performance culture across the departments.

Interestingly, in the UK we use various terms for the sporting director and set varied expectations.

In this respect, many view the sporting director as being in charge of recruitment. Indeed, many will be measured (hired and fired) on which players they recruit.

Our research tells us that the sporting director role is much more than this though and being able to recruit is only part of the job."

- What traits does a good sporting director need?



Txiki Begiristain has been Manchester City's sporting director since 2012. *Credit: PA*

"The sporting director is someone who the owners are investing in for the long-term.

The role requires the utmost due diligence, as the sporting director will be the custodian for the club's sporting performance.

For us, this is the most important position in a football club.

The sporting director must have: Football industry knowledge, business and financial acumen, ability to lead and develop a high-performance culture, ability to develop and deliver a strategy both strategically and operationally, an understanding of good governance and an ability to manage change and innovation.

Importantly for football in the UK, you may note that recruitment is not a 'must have' here.

Our research shows that the sporting director should recruit the best person possible as a Head of Recruitment, to allow that person explicit focus as one of the key departments in the sporting strategy."

- Are Norwich right to change their structure and put their faith in a sporting director? Is it something that could catch on and what would you say to those who are sceptical?



It promises to be a summer of change at Carrow Road. *Credit: PA*

"It appears that Norwich are taking a leap of faith. However, for many who understand the role, the club have an opportunity to protect their investment and bring on-field success through effective leadership and decision-making in the short, medium and long-term.

Clubs increasingly need to develop a competitive advantage. The sporting director can help develop a strategy to improve performance on and off the pitch.

This is not just about recruitment. It includes enacting more subtle strategies, which are not commonplace in football - such as clear communication lines between departments.

For example, ensuring the Head of Recruitment, First Team Manager, Head of Academy, Head of Performance/Sport Science, Under-21s Manager and the sporting director have frequent opportunities to discuss key areas such as performance and recruitment prospects.

Ultimately, the increased finances in football have heightened the need for clubs to strengthen their financial sustainability.

The sporting director role is a major part in protecting multi-million pound investments whilst also bringing further success and rewards."

- What will Stuart Webber's short, medium and long-term tasks be at the club?



Norwich chairman Ed Balls was keen for the structure changes to take place. *Credit: PA*

"In the short-term, promotion to the Premier League is clearly the main objective for next season. Before that though, he needs to recruit Alex Neil's successor to give them the best possible chance of achieving that.

Looking further ahead, communication with fans will be vital. Robbie Brady has just been sold for a fee in the region of £12million, but the reality is that Stuart might only see £2million of this for transfers. This and other examples need to be communicated to the club's fans.

There also needs to be shift in the culture. The comments by Cameron Jerome seem in the distant past, but they suggest a negative culture developing at Carrow Road. This needs attention and management to develop a positive high-performance culture as soon as possible.

- [Jerome: 'Lack of respect' has cost Norwich City](#)

In terms of the longer-term vision, creating a culture where there's clear expectations and accountability will help achieve success.

Norwich do not want to yo-yo in and out of the Premier League.

Recruitment alone won't achieve this. The sporting director must develop and deliver a clear sporting strategy for the club."

- Finally, do you know anything about Webber? Has he got the credentials to turn the club around?



Norwich have had a season to forget in The Championship. *Credit: PA*

"Stuart Webber is very well-regarded in football for his previous work. He received notable media acclaim for his role in bringing Raheem Sterling to Liverpool from QPR in 2010 for example.

Yet, that was at Liverpool (who, as an Everton fan, it hurts to admit are a global football powerhouse) and not Norwich.

However, working with both Damien Comolli and Frank McParland has definitely helped develop Stuart as a strong and diligent operator in recruitment.

It appears that Norwich do not just need a sporting director to act as a Head of Recruitment, but they also need someone who can deliver a sporting strategy that deals with the potential issues with low morale of staff, alongside delivering long-term success.

It remains to be seen whether Stuart is up to huge challenge ahead of him, but I certainly wish him the best of luck."

- Who is Norwich City's new sporting director?